



## A history of Republican public relations in Northern Ireland from "Bloody Sunday" to the Good Friday Agreement

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## **Introduction**

For a variety of reasons, largely to do with significant global geo-political events, recent academic scholarly activity in public relations (PR) has turned its attention to analyzing issues such as the relationship between PR and terrorism (Richards, 2004), terrorism and crisis management in the US (Wright, 2004; Ulmer and Sellow, 2002), the uses of PR tactics by armed state and non-state actors (Loew, 2003) and government PR in response to terrorism (Hiebert, 2005; Zhang, 2007). This study aims to contribute to this growing body of knowledge, and the emerging critical debate on PR in conflict and post-conflict contexts, by focusing on the role and use of PR strategies by the IRA (Irish Republican Army) and their political wing Sinn Féin (who for much of the period known as the Northern Ireland 'Troubles' was a proscribed illegal organisation). The analysis of IRA/Sinn Féin PR strategy will examine the use of what Gerry Adams (Sinn Féin President) described as 'spectaculars', their day-to-day publicity efforts, their foreign and domestic media relations and their internal organizational communication. Public relations 'turning points' will be analysed in relation to key historical events including Bloody Sunday, Internment, the Hunger Strikes, censorship and the broadcasting ban, and finally the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. A key aim of the study is to trace the transformation in Sinn Féin's PR as the organisation made the transition from political wing and public face of republican terrorism to mainstream political party or, as Spencer (2006) put it, "from political pariah into a party which is representative of democratic change and peace in Northern Ireland" (p. 356). In many ways this is an important PR (hi)story and it is without doubt a key story in any attempt to analyse the period known as the Northern Ireland 'Troubles'.

As noted above, recent academic scholarly activity in PR (and for a considerably longer period in media studies and political communication) has turned its attention to analyzing issues surrounding terrorism and PR. This is a significant body of work which is important in helping to develop a critical understanding of the role and function of PR

in contemporary society. It should be noted that much of this recent analysis of terrorism, PR and the media reiterates the ‘propaganda of the deed’ (Picard, 1989; Loew, 2005) explanations of terrorist activities which echoes the work of scholars like Laqueur (1977) who noted that: “Terrorists have learned that the media are of paramount importance in their campaigns, that the terrorist act by itself is next to nothing, whereas publicity is all” (p. 223). We begin our analysis with a discussion of the key theoretical and conceptual issues as they are articulated in the literature on the relationship between terrorism and PR before moving on to discuss the perspectives of the participants interviewed in this study. Key events and critical incidents are used to contextualise our interview data and help build understanding of important changes within the republican movement and the accompanying PR developments throughout the historical period under review.

### **Theoretical background**

#### Defining terrorism

Any discussion of terrorism, as with most controversial topics, cannot get very far without an engagement with definitional issues. In a classic work on terrorism and the media Schlesinger et al (1983) argue that the mass media is the forum where different perspectives on ‘terrorism’ struggle for dominance in contemporary liberal democratic societies. PR resources are utilized by proponents of the different perspectives in an attempt to influence media representations and ultimately public perceptions of terrorism. Schlesinger et al (1983) identify two of the key perspectives as the ‘Official’ perspective and the ‘Alternative’ perspective. The official perspective is articulated by those who speak for the ‘State’ (e.g. government ministers, conservative politicians, top security ‘experts’ etc) and while not always a coherent set of ideas it tends to stress terrorism’s criminality and sometimes argues that responding to the ‘threat’ of terrorism may require suspending due process (for example, the right to trial). The official perspective therefore usually tends to seek to present the ‘terrorist’ as beyond the bounds of acceptable behaviour, that is, as either criminals or madmen. Schlesinger et al (1983) note that what they term the ‘alternative’ perspective is articulated by those who dissent from the official view of terrorism but accept that violence is not legitimate within liberal-democracies (e.g. civil libertarians, critical academics, some journalists, some politicians). The alternative perspective treats the term ‘terrorism’ as *partial*, a term

which tends to be harnessed for propaganda purposes but which explains very little. For Chomsky and Herman (1979) the terms *terror* and *terrorism* “have become semantic tools of the powerful in the Western world” (p. 85). They argue that terrorism is widespread in the contemporary world but that it is important to recognize the distinction between ‘wholesale terror’ produced by State actors and ‘retail terror’ produced by small groups. More recently Best et al (2007) adopt and update this ‘alternative’ view when they point out that: “‘Terrorism’ has become an increasingly ubiquitous part of everyday life, and yet the meaning of the term proves to be elusive” (p.6). This is, they note:

[L]argely because “terrorism” is a highly loaded, complex, and malleable term whose use and meaning are influenced by emotion, political ideology, and even culture. All too often, its sense depends on those who monopolize the means of communication ... Speakers routinely brand their adversaries as “terrorists” in order to discredit their opponents and avoid inquiry into the conditions that motivate their actions. ... If dissenting individuals or groups are successfully demonized as “terrorist”, they are painted as fanatics, as people not to be reasoned with, as individuals who need to be dealt with in a harsh or violent way and to whom laws and constitutional rights do not apply.’ (Best et al 2007, p. 6)

#### PR literature and terrorism

What terrorism is, how it is defined and who is defining it is important because arguably much recent PR academic literature has tended to adopt what Schlesinger et al (1983) would term the ‘official’ view. To take one example, in his definition of ‘terrorism’ Richards (2004) seems to restrict it to what Chomsky and Herman (1979) would refer to as ‘retail terror’, that is, it is an activity that individuals or small groups, not State actors, engage in. In his discussion of the relationship between PR and terrorism Richards devotes some space to analyzing the motivation of the ‘terrorist’ and again arguably reiterates the ‘official’ perspective. He notes that “terror can be seen as fuelled in part by a sort of madness within the terrorist ... a form of psychopathology, indeed as a form of psychosis” and he goes on to point out that “the psychotic is incapable of the kind of accurate reading of the feelings and perceptions of others which underpins good and effective PR” (Richards, 2004, p. 171). Richards largely restricts his analysis of the relationship between terrorism and PR to the issues surrounding, and the significance of, the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 Al Qaeda attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. It may be argued that his classification, of terrorists as psychopaths, may have significance when applied to those who carried out the atrocities of 9/11 although it should be pointed

out that many liberal Muslim scholars would disagree with this analysis. For example, Mohamed Charfi, the noted Islamic legal scholar and opponent of Islamic fundamentalism, noted of the Islamist suicide bomber: “Such a rank-and-file militant is the product of a culture and a history, and above all of a particular kind of education” (2005, p. 16). This is not to argue that the adoption of violence is a legitimate response but rather to point out that an analysis of ‘terrorism’ which defines it only as a spectacular stunt carried out by small groups of criminals or psychotic militants ultimately lacks any real explanatory power or coherence. One could also point out that such a partial perspective on ‘terrorism’ seems to remove the concept of ‘state terrorism’ from the debate which no doubt would be welcomed by many governments around the world today.

Interestingly a key early work on PR and terrorism implicitly rejected this notion of terrorist PR as the unsophisticated by product of psychopathic behaviour. Picard (1989) noted that in respect to academic research and scholarly debate on the topic:

A significant amount of discussion has been devoted to media activities but most of it has assumed terrorist groups to be indirect manipulators of media coverage, relying upon their violence to induce coverage and thus help achieve their goals. ... These discussions, however, have generally ignored the existence of significant press relations activities of terrorist organizations that go beyond the propaganda of the deed and involve extensive direct contacts with media. (p. 12).

According to the ‘propaganda of the deed’ thesis (Laqueur, 1977; Picard, 1989; Loew, 2005) the primary aim of the terrorist is to draw attention to their cause by engaging in acts of political violence to try to exploit the mass media as a communication channel. Picard (1989) however argues that another key, and often ignored, communicative activity of many terrorist groups has been publicity efforts to raise public awareness and influence public opinion. He notes: “Publicity is an organized form of persuasion that attempts to influence opinion by focusing attention on causes, persons, or institutions... Terrorists have an advantage in gaining this type of publicity because the public and violent nature of their acts guarantees that media will provide some coverage” (1989, p.13). He does not however take the view that terrorist groups are exclusively engaged in ‘press agency’ PR. According to Picard:

Labelling perpetrators of terrorism as seekers of publicity for its own sake is simplistic and ignores their very significant efforts to direct news coverage to present their cause in favourable ways...Some groups plan and implement extensive publicity campaigns...[and]...use most of the techniques normally employed by public relations professionals' (1989, p. 14).

Picard's study examines how a range of terrorist groups utilise typical PR tactics and employ techniques such as press releases, statements, articles for publications and background information in the form of press kits, fact sheets, press conferences, interviews, and the provision of visual materials (1989, p. 14).

Picard articulates a rather different approach to the analysis of terrorist PR and in concluding his analysis he makes the observation:

If a terrorist group has or gains wide popular support, it may be difficult for officials to perpetually refuse to deal with its leadership. Some groups, understanding the on-going nature of political struggle, begin their activities with significant levels of violence, then reduce its scale and replace the propaganda of the deed with other forms of publicity and lower levels of violence, and may indicate that they will give up perpetrating terrorist acts in exchange for official recognition....Many of the groups are directed by intelligent, well-educated individuals who are well aware of the impact of media on public opinion and politics. Some receive training and support in their media efforts and many are adopting the same publicity techniques used by governments to convey their views and messages (Picard 1989, p. 21).

In some ways his comments accurately describe the story of republicanism in Northern Ireland from the end of the 1960s to the IRA ceasefire and political peace process of the 1990s. As we shall see, the notion of the well planned unfolding strategy described above does not really reflect the lived experience of those who developed and directed publicity and PR activity for the republican movement during the Northern Ireland 'Troubles'.

### **Methodology**

The substantive part of this study is based on interview data which was gathered as part of the 'Northern Ireland PR Oral History Project 2003-2010'.<sup>i</sup> This project has as its central aim the provision of an archive of interviews from actors engaged in PR and professional communication in the political, economic and social/cultural spheres in Northern Ireland since the 1960s. The respondents used for this study are republican press officers and political strategists: Danny Morrison, Jim Gibney, Richard McAuley, Danny Devenney, Brendan McFarlane and Gerry Adams. The interviews were conducted

between 2003 and 2007 and on average lasted 45 minutes, they were semi-structured in format and the interviewees answered all the questions that were put to them. In these elite interviews the participants reflect on the PR strategies and tactics deployed by the armed republican movement and articulate their understanding of political PR. The interview technique, and in particular the elite/expert interview has both strengths and limitations as a research method. Bogner *et al* (2009) note that “Conducting expert interviews can serve to shorten time-consuming data gathering processes, particularly if the experts are seen as ‘crystallization points’ for practical insider knowledge and are interviewed as surrogates for a wider circle of players...expert interviews offer researchers an effective means of quickly obtaining results and, indeed, of quickly obtaining good results.” (p. 2). There are however several issues to bear in mind when conducting the kind of interviews which provided the data for this paper. McEvoy (2006) writing about employing the interview method in Northern Ireland cautions “the nature of antagonistic politics in a divided society can mean that seemingly straightforward questions can provoke adversarial, sectarian responses’ (p. 185) It is also important to make clear, as L’Etang (2008) points out there is always a risk in conducting elite interviews with participants who are “masters and mistresses of impression management” (p. 323). Nevertheless, while there is clearly an element of staying ‘on message’, all interviewees were asked to reflect as individuals on issues raised in the interview and many of them did speak candidly about the key decisions surrounding the development of republican PR during the ‘Troubles’.

It should also be made clear that this research, like Spencer’s (2006) study of republicans and the media during the 1998 Northern Ireland peace process, was not concerned with a textual analysis of the media in order to arrive at some assessment of the strengths and limitations of the IRA and Sinn Féin’s media relations strategies. This would be an interesting but quite different study. Our research focused on gathering the participants’ attitudes and perceptions on the role and function of various aspects of PR practice; publicity, media relations, organisational communication and issues management. As background, this research project also utilized the extensive research data on the ‘Troubles’ held in the University of Ulster’s Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN) and the resources of the International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE).

We present our findings below in three sections based on three strategic phases of the republican movement's involvement in the Northern Ireland 'Troubles'. The three sections focus, in turn, on: the use of violence or 'armed struggle' and the PR activities surrounding that (what we term the 'propaganda of the deed' phase); the development of political PR in response to the republican movement's decision to engage in electoral politics; and thirdly the PR and media relations underpinning the attempts to disengage from the 'armed struggle' and build a peace process in Northern Ireland. These phases are in some senses chronological with one strategy de facto replacing the previous one but as was noted above our findings indicate that there was no fully worked out strategy and in important ways these phases were as reactive to external events as they were proactive. It should also be noted that in significant ways these phases overlap, for example the IRA was still exploding bombs in London in 1996 during the endgame of what was meant to be the peace process phase.

The research questions which underpinned this study were:

1. What were the key changes and developments in the PR practice of the republican movement over the period of 'the Troubles'?
2. How did the republican movement manage the PR surrounding 'critical incidents' and key events of 'the Troubles'?
3. How do the participants understand and define PR?

## **Political violence and PR**

### 'Propaganda of the deed'

A coherent and organised approach to PR within the republican movement took time to develop. Despite early British government policy and PR disasters like internment<sup>ii</sup> (indefinite imprisonment without trial) and the 'Bloody Sunday' massacre (where 13 civil rights marchers were shot dead by the British army) republicans failed to gain the full propaganda value from these events. Our interviewees were in agreement that Sinn Féin/IRA had demonstrated little skill in exploiting these stories outside their own 'active' communities. As Danny Morrison noted "if we, in 1971, had the PR skills we had twenty years later we would have ran rings around the British government." Richard McAuley did reflect on the policy decisions of the British Government in terms



of their PR implications but he notes it was the political and constitutional impacts which were viewed as most significant at the time. He states:

Internment wasn't simply a PR disaster for the unionists or for the British, it was a political disaster...the British hadn't yet managed to get in place entirely this view of this conflict as sectarian ... and they were here keeping the peace, they were still in the early stages of promoting that view of themselves and that view of the conflict, so the PR in that sense was a disaster, but it was also a political disaster because... although Bloody Sunday is often given as the reason for it I think the fact is there is clearly a connection between internment in August '71 and the prorogation at Stormont in March '72.

Interestingly, McAuley also points here to what could be described as the British Government's initial failure to 'frame' the conflict as sectarian strife with the British military offering a peace-keeping role. Entman (1993) notes that the process of framing is in essence "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendations for the item described" (p. 51). McAuley, like several other participants in this study, was very familiar with the concept of 'framing' and its use in constructing a narrative or discourse about the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The battle over what frame to use to explain the conflict would be played out over the subsequent decades and is particularly evident in the media relations of both sides.

In these early days some media relations opportunities were successfully organised like the Ballymurphy press call organised by Gerry Adams to declare that the IRA were still intact despite internment (August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1971). While such events showed the "media and PR skills that were to follow" on the whole most opportunities were stifled by lack of experience (Moloney 2007, p. 101). Arguably it is also the case that while the political chaos left by the collapsing institutions of unionist rule could have been exploited to a wider audience more skilfully to the advantage of the republican cause the reality was that the violence was ratcheted up on all sides and this resulted in the republican movement primarily communicating through the 'propaganda of the deed' (Picard, 1989; Loew, 2005). McAuley articulates this perspective when he reflects on the IRA bombing campaign which characterised the 1970s;

[E]very operation that the IRA carried out wasn't just about that operation, it was about the political affect that operation would have in conjunction with all the others and also the propaganda factor would happen, it was often said that one IRA action, one bomb attack in London was worth 100 here, because over the years the international media, unless some huge atrocity happened, the media tended to ignore this place whereas if something happened in London it became headlines around the world.

The IRA accompanied their attacks, as most terrorist organisations do with statements to the press and it is clear that there was frequently a conscious attempt to create sound-bites for the media. After the assassination of the Duke of Edinburgh's uncle, Lord Louis Mountbatten on the 27<sup>th</sup> August, 1979, and then later that day the killing of 18 British soldiers in roadsides bombs, wall murals sprang up in Belfast which read "13 gone and not forgotten (a reference to those killed on Bloody Sunday), we got 18 and Mountbatten." Danny Devenney, who designed the *Republican News* newspaper and was also in charge of co-ordinating wall murals in Belfast during this period, noted that this was very effective way to get the republican message across. He suggests: "You have to follow Saatchi and Saatchi's theory of advertising, the best murals are the one's with the simplest message, so people drive on and get the message immediately... They might agree or disagree with the point you're trying to make, but at least it has soaked through into their consciousness."

However the urge to vary the 'spectaculars' to keep the media interested also brought tragedy for ordinary citizens as well as PR disasters for the republican movement. One of the most devastating came on the 8<sup>th</sup> November 1987 when the IRA planted a 40lb bomb in Enniskillen as people gathered for a Remembrance Sunday service at the town's war memorial. The blast killed 13 and injured 63, 19 of them seriously. Danny Morrison remembers that in the immediate aftermath Sinn Féin spokesmen appeared in the media to express 'regret' but they stopped giving interviews soon after the event because "to attempt to explain it or put it in context would have appeared to have been justifying it." Reflecting on Enniskillen and previous tragic blunders by the IRA Morrison stated:

I was the first Sinn Féin representative to do an interview after Enniskillen and it was on Talkback [BBC radio] and it was about half an hour long and it was extremely difficult. First of all I wasn't going to defend what happened and couldn't defend what happened. And there were other incidents like that down the

years. Le Mon when twelve people were, a bomb went off, and they were burnt to death. Horrific deaths, you can't put a gloss on things like that.

Picard (1989) suggests that a distinction can be drawn between terrorist PR and 'normal' PR practice. He notes: "Publicity of negative information is usually not sought by PR practitioners, but it is clearly sought by terrorist groups, and its effect must differ from publicity of positive information" (1989, p. 13). Arguably this can be seen to be only partially true in the case of Sinn Féin spokesmen defending IRA violence. On some occasions, as Morrison states, they disengaged from media relations altogether and withdrew from attempts to employ the language of apology typical of state and non-state actors when they cause civilian casualties during conflict.

### Media censorship

PR disasters involving the slaughter of innocent civilians were damaging for the republican movement, which relied on projecting the key frame that *they* were the innocent oppressed group suffering at the hands of British state violence and political repression. However a much more significant issue in respect to communicating with audiences outside Northern Ireland was the increasing levels of British government censorship in respect to press coverage of the conflict. At the beginning of the Troubles 'pressure' was exerted by the British government in various ways upon the media covering the developing conflict in Northern Ireland. So much so that in late 1971, 200 mainly British journalists met to sign a 'declaration of intent' about "the intensification of censorship on TV, radio and the press coverage of events in Northern Ireland and pledge ourselves to oppose it" (CAIN – The British Media in Ireland:

<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/media/docs/freespeech.htm>). Although there was no legal ban on coverage at this time, according to all of our interviewees, British government pressure on the media, along with their own lack of communication skills, did have a significant negative impact their ability to convey their message to external audiences.

A recognition of the difficulties in getting their message across to the mainstream mass media led by the mid-1970s to a much more focused attempt to organise and improve republican PR and media relations. The first significant initiative was the establishment of the press centre on the Falls Road in Belfast. As Curtis (1984) points out, it wasn't long before "the telex machine was put to increasing use, and became a

crucial tool, allowing republicans to convey their version of incidents immediately to the press, and for the first time enabling them to compete seriously with the various British PR operations” (p. 265). Secondly, a highly skilled media manager, Danny Morrison, had taken over the editorship of the *Republican News* on his release from internment in 1975 and later, in 1979, became Sinn Féin Director of Publicity. Morrison explains his role in terms that most PR practitioners would understand:

[J]ournalists are particularly lazy people. So we would try and present the story as written so that they would have to do the minimum amount of work. And also we learnt things about deadlines - you could manage to get your story quite prominent on the news depending on how you leaked it. Or if you gave an exclusive or you gave somebody more details than others...if a journalist continually messed us around or misrepresented what we were saying I would just cease to give that journalist invitations to press conferences and that would hurt that journalist...Not only did we send out statements but we learnt that when you send out statements you then phoned up the newspaper...Then you monitor the newspaper and you chase it up...“What’s happening to our statement?” “Where’s it going?” We did all of those things.

Morrison also makes it clear that he sought to bring a more image conscious approach into the republican movement’s media relations especially in respect to broadcast interviews. These became much more carefully stage managed and Morrison made sure it was always hand picked Sinn Féin representatives who were interviewed. He states:

Instead of Panorama interviewing an IRA spokesperson in silhouette wearing a hood which is a very bad image. Which is a terrorist image. It was far better for the republican cause if they were interviewing me or someone like me who was giving an opinion and analysing why the IRA was doing the things that it was doing...[T]he subliminal affect on the English audience was that these are no longer sinister shadowy people; these are people that have an articulate position.

His appointment as editor of *Republican News* was also to turn out to be a very significant in the internal power struggles which lay ahead for Sinn Féin. The newspaper was an important organ for the republican movement in its effort to communicate with its own supporters although when Morrison took over it was very under-resourced. As Devenney recollects:

The *Republican News* at that time was almost like a local news-sheet. It wasn’t the professional publication that people see today because of resources ...we didn’t have any photographers at the time – it was all voluntary, people came in and assisted us by giving us photographs. But we couldn’t say, like other newspapers, to a photographer ‘Go and take a picture’.

All this changed however, and Morrison's importance and influence increased, when in 1979 the republican newspapers *An Phoblacht* [The Nation] and *Republican News* merged. The significance of the newly merged paper can be measured in its rapid growth into a 12-18 page format, a 30,000 weekly distribution and the fact that even the British government eventually used it to try to reach the republican mass audience. Moloney (2007) notes that the merger of the paper was also a success for Gerry Adams, bringing him further power by isolating the former *An Phoblacht* editor Gerry O'Hare and his wing of the republican movement. It meant that the republican movement had one main media organ and that it therefore now spoke with one voice. It also meant that republicanism was arguably now clearly moving beyond merely adopting the limited propaganda of the deed approach to communication. As Picard (1989) points out: "well established and supported groups that employ terrorism often operate their own media to publicise their efforts among supporters and group members" (p. 20).

#### Media ban

Finally it is worth noting that the merged republican newspaper was to become even more significant when the UK followed the Republic of Ireland in introducing a broadcasting ban in 1988. The Irish Minister who introduced the ban in 1976, Conor Cruise O'Brien, rejected the argument that Sinn Féin were a legitimate political party and denied them all broadcast media access in the Republic of Ireland, labelling them "a PR agency for a murder gang" (Wilkinson 1997, p. 61). The British government led by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher imposed a broadcasting ban on Sinn Féin from October 1988 to the September 1994 in order, as she put it, to starve IRA/Sinn Féin of the 'oxygen of publicity'. While the use of sub-titles and voice over made the broadcasting ban an issue of ridicule for some, it did have a negative impact on Sinn Féin. Richard McAuley suggests that the ban had a significant impact on the republican movement's media relations and points to a survey Danny Morrison conducted of media coverage before and after the ban was imposed. McAuley states:

In the previous two years the number of interviews done by Sinn Féin with the broadcast media namely the BBC, UTV and Downtown [radio] had run into the hundreds. In the same period after the broadcast ban it was a handful the broadcast restrictions were very clever in that they didn't say that you couldn't do

an interview with me and broadcast it you just couldn't use my voice... I don't think we overcame the issue of censorship we probably didn't even hold our own.

However it should be noted that the republican movement was a fundamentally different organisation by the end of the 1980s than the republican movement at end of the 1970s. Sinn Féin was now engaged in electoral politics and this was a shift in strategy and policy which changed the nature of the organisation fundamentally. To understand why this transformation occurred we must go back to 1981 and assess what was perhaps the most important event of the whole conflict for the republican movement, and perhaps also in many ways for Northern Ireland as a whole, the 'Hunger Strikes'.

### **Sinn Féin and the development of political PR**

The republican movement by the end of the 1970s was to some extent on the back foot with the substantial investment in military intelligence gathering sanctioned by the Labour Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Roy Mason, having the effect of disrupting the organisation. It was however clear that they could not be completely defeated militarily by the British Army either. The cycle of violence continued with political assassinations and sectarian killings, particularly by loyalist paramilitaries, characterising this period. In 1979 a Conservative party administration led by Margaret Thatcher was elected in the UK and this did ultimately result in a change of strategy for the republican movement. The Thatcher government's key policies in respect to Northern Ireland focused on putting more resources into defeating the IRA militarily while at the same time rigorously reinforcing the rules on political status for IRA prisoners who had been protesting against the withdrawal of 'Special Category Status' since 1976. The protest escalated after it became clear that the new British Government would not negotiate on this issue and republican prisoners would continue to be treated as criminals rather than 'prisoners of war'.

### **The 'Hunger Strikes'**

As noted above the republican movement has always attempted to present itself as the 'oppressed' fighting for national self-determination against a colonial power. The 1981 'Hunger Strikes' which led to the deaths of 10 prisoners and the election of their leader Bobby Sands as a British MP brought this struggle to an international audience and garnered enormous support from around the world. According to Brendan MacFarlane,

the prisoner's PRO at the time, the decision to go on hunger strike was initially taken by the prisoners inside the Maze prison to resist the prisons policy in respect to republicans in Northern Ireland jails. It was not initially part of an IRA/Sinn Féin strategy and was in fact opposed by the IRA leadership outside the prison. Nevertheless despite internal dissension over the strategy the Sinn Féin PR team moved quickly to secure the best coverage. Danny Morrison when comparing the media relations effort surrounding the hunger strikes to that of 'Bloody Sunday' ten years earlier suggests that Sinn Féin were able to draw on what they had learnt from the previous decade:

So when you look back you can see that there's a lot of missed opportunities. I mean for example, look at Bloody Sunday. The publicity that came from Bloody Sunday, it happened by the local people themselves. Whereas years later for example if the British Army shot somebody dead I would be trying to get a photograph of that person to the Press Association. ... And a photograph is an embarrassment. You see in 1981 when Bobby Sands went on hunger strike and when Bobby stood for election. We brought out a poster of Bobby where he has long hair and he's smiling. It was actually taken in jail, when he was in jail the first time in 1973. But he looks like a hippy in this photograph, he looks quite pleasant, quite affable, and dignified. We got that image around the world and the British government realised "Fucking hell, this is bad for us." So they get on to the Press Association and they try to get the media to use a photograph of Bobby Sands when he had been arrested with a number plate beneath him, like a mug-shot. But it was too late, we'd got out there in front. You can see the importance. We wouldn't have had that knowledge back in 1971, to put photographs out.

The media coverage generated from the hunger strikes demonstrates that the republican movement had developed a much more professional PR approach to media relations compared to the previous decade. Rolston and Miller (1996) note that there were 47 negative editorials of British policy in the American media alone during the hunger strike period. The exposure of the conflict to an international audience was significant but the Hunger Strike's most important outcome was that it "made it possible, much sooner than anyone imagined, for Sinn Féin to fully embrace electoral politics" (Moloney 2007, p. 210).

### Electoral Politics

One thing that all of our interviewees are in agreement on is the crucial significance of the election of the leader of the hunger strikers Bobby Sands as a Member of the British Parliament. Sinn Féin's official policy at the time was abstentionism in respect to both

the British House of Commons and the Irish parliament, Dáil Éireann. Westminster was regarded as having no jurisdiction over Northern Ireland and official policy on the Dáil (although most disavowed it in private) was that it was a puppet of the British state. Sinn Féin boycotted both political institutions and when it did stand candidates in either jurisdiction it always described this activity as a 'political intervention'. Gerry Adams makes this clear: "Bobby's election was an intervention as opposed to an electoral strategy, but his success accelerated that entire process." This point that Sands' election was the beginning of a new phase in Sinn Féin's thinking about the conflict and its strategic approach is made by several interviewees. Jim Gibney makes clear his belief that without the hunger strikes, and subsequent elections of prisoners, Sinn Féin may not have gambled on going down the political route: "We took a risk in putting Bobby Sands forward, because there was always a chance that he could've been defeated." However Gibney notes that electoral success transformed Sinn Féin thinking in regard to traditional politics: "By the mid 80s Sinn Féin, the political leadership of Sinn Féin is beginning to see the importance of elections as a way of building a political party right across the island." Danny Morrison, however, rejects the notion that putting the hunger striking prisoners up for election was in any way part of some overall planned political or PR strategy that Sinn Féin had worked out to propel the party into electoral politics.

Reflecting on the period Morrison states:

[A] lot of journalists and writers who come here and look back are looking back with the advantage of hindsight. They only see history as it developed and not the difficulties and the difficult decisions people had to make at any one time. And they think, "Look how clever the Republicans were. They got Bobby Sands to stand and he got elected. They got Owen Carron to stand and he got elected, then they stood in the Assembly elections, then Gerry Adams got elected as MP the next year." It's as if everything was part of a pearl on a string that followed logically and it didn't happen like that. It was high risk putting up Bobby Sands. If he had lost that election Thatcher would have said "Even your own people reject you."

### Internal communication

Picard (1989) suggests that sometimes a terrorist group's "publicity attempts can also single out specific audiences... In some cases the publicity is aimed at terrorist colleagues" (Picard 1989, p. 17). Moving into electoral politics was a far from easy



transition for the republican movement and the chief opposition to such a strategy lay within the organisation. This meant that in some respects the key communication effort for the Sinn Féin leadership for much of the 1980s was focused on its internal audience. Spencer (2006) argues that one shouldn't underestimate the enormous struggle which occurred within the republican movement in regard to the change from an abstentionist policy to one of political engagement. He notes: "The leadership of Sinn Féin had to sell the idea to the republican grassroots that the political path could deliver more in terms of future goals and this demanded careful planning and repeated manoeuvring within leadership meetings, which faced stiff opposition throughout" (Spencer 2006, p. 362).

All changes to Sinn Féin party policy must be passed by the membership at the annual *Ard Feis* (party conference) and this forum became the key site of a struggle between those who wished to move the party toward mainstream democratic politics and those who opposed this. It was the scene of many set piece persuasive attempts to change the policy on abstentionism. In 1981 Danny Morrison famously made an impassioned plea to push through this fundamental change to the Sinn Féin constitution. Morrison declared 'will anyone here object if, with a ballot paper in one hand and an armalite in the other we take power in Ireland'. Commenting on the famous sound-bite of Morrison's Gerry Adams notes:

I was never comfortable with the remark, it was a very internalised remark, ... it was a remark which Danny made to other republicans and more importantly, I suppose, I understand this retrospectively, but I didn't at that time, was that a small group of people led by Ruairi [O'Bradaigh – former Sinn Féin president] and others were totally opposed to any involvement in electoralism apart from interventions and you can see why that was the case, because clearly that took you in a certain direction ... but I mean there's no other way to go, if you want to win a struggle, you can only do it by winning the maximum amount of support possible.

After several years of internal debate and negotiation the policy change was finally agreed at the *Ard Feis* in November 1986 when a resolution proposed by Martin McGuinness was carried by the required two-thirds majority. Sinn Féin would no longer abstain from taking their seats in the Dáil however, while they would stand for election for the British Parliament, they would abstain from taking up their seats at Westminster. This fundamental change to a policy which had existed for over 60 years had an

important impact on PR strategy and tactics. Sinn Féin had been behaving more like a mainstream political party throughout the first half of the 1980's, for example investing heavily in local (*cumann*) and constituency level organisation and contesting seriously council elections. But this policy change, as Adams hints at in the quote above, meant it could now set its sights on attempting to become the biggest nationalist political party in Northern Ireland. Political PR, in the sense that it is understood by most political parties in democratic societies, increasingly came to characterise Sinn Féin's communication activities. This is demonstrated in the final phase of the republican movements' development examined in this study when it disengaged from violent struggle and engaged in peace making and peace building.

### **The PR of peace-making**

#### The Peace Process

While the key policy shifts traced in this study were highly significant and ultimately changed the nature and role of Sinn Féin profoundly it should be remembered that even in the latter years of the 1980s the IRA was still heavily engaged in political violence. So while it could be argued that the most significant change in the republican movement was the embracing of electoral politics it is clear that ending the 'armed struggle' involved just as much effort in respect to persuasive internal communication and PR. Jim Gibney describes this internal communication process within the republican movement:

The individual activists of the organisation had to be contacted on an ongoing basis, they needed to know what was happening to the peace process, they needed to be involved in so far as they could be involved in making decisions about the development of the peace process and as often as possible, especially around big decisions that had to be made, they needed to be brought together and the political thinking behind the strategic move needed to be put to them as well.

At the same time that this internal communication effort was going on, Sinn Féin also had to demonstrate to this audience that a peace strategy could achieve political results.

Spencer (2006) notes that its external media relations and its internal communication are intimately related. He suggests:

Sinn Féin's ability to shape news is connected both to the structural cohesion of the party (where internal planning, organisation and discipline are key to decision making) and a sophisticated understanding of communication skills. ...The

organisation, presentation and distribution of messages, along with intense dialogue and control to avoid splits and open dissent (Spencer 2006, p. 380).

In January 1994 Irish premier Albert Reynolds lifted the 18 year old ban on radio and television interviews with Sinn Féin in the Republic of Ireland and Moloney (2007) notes this took Sinn Féin closer to “being treated like a normal, respectable political party” (p. 419). The long road to ‘legitimacy’ which in many ways had begun with the election of Bobby Sands took another major step forward when, against the wishes of the British government, in February 1994 US President Clinton granted Gerry Adams a visa to visit the USA after a 20 year ban. These initiatives and the ongoing negotiations between the republican leadership and the British Conservative government led to the announcement of an IRA ceasefire in August 1994. Adams’s work in America throughout 1994 and the publicity he gained are testament to his networking abilities and his teams’ PR skills. Bill Flynn (Chairman of Mutual Life Insurance Company) who had facilitated the visit of Gerry Adams and recalled “He was on coast-to-coast TV programmes, he was a tremendous hit...a thoughtful, reasonable, thinking person not a “terrorist”...curiously what made the thing a PR success of the first order was the fact he had been drowned out by the British rules and regulations” (Feeney 2002, p. 404).

#### The ‘Good Friday Agreement’

The ceasefire negotiated with John Major’s Conservative government was an uneasy one and the IRA broke the truce in 1996 to launch several high profile bombing attacks on the British mainland which caused over £1 billion worth of damage (Dillon 1996, p. 292). However, electoral change at Westminster gave fresh impetus to the peace process in Northern Ireland and when this was combined with intense internal communication efforts within the republican movement it led to a permanent IRA ceasefire in June 1997. It was the election in 1997 of Tony Blair’s Labour government in London and Bertie Ahern’s Fianna Fail /Progressive Democrats coalition in Dublin that stimulated the movement toward the ‘Good Friday Agreement’, the most significant constitutional change in Ireland since the partition of the island in 1920. On the 10<sup>th</sup> April 1998 the Good Friday Agreement was signed. The corner stone of the agreement was the setting up of a new devolved legislature in which unionists and nationalists would share

power. In addition a North-South Ministerial Council was established to oversee a series of cross border bodies.

Spencer (2006) notes that Sinn Féin's media management expertise was especially evident in the final hours of negotiations before the Good Friday agreement was signed. He points out that, "in comparison to Unionists who would appeal to the cameras too quickly and in doing so reveal a certain desperation which symbolised a lack of confidence and control, Adams and McGuinness would use the power of non-verbal communication to reflect the opposite" (p. 364). According to Spencer, at this crucial stage Sinn Féin used the watching media outside the talk's venue to broadcast messages to different audiences. He observes:

Rather than merely running to the cameras to appeal about elements of the agreement which would be unacceptable, Adams and McGuinness would often walk around the car park smiling to each other and looking relaxed. This was picked up by the cameras and screened to audiences who interpreted the signs quite differently. For republican constituencies the signs were that Sinn Féin were doing well in the talks (although this was, of course, a performance with political intent), but for unionists the opposite perception was more likely. Images of Sinn Féin representatives smiling could only mean for many unionists that the talks were going badly, and would lead to intensified pressure on unionist participants to do more in the talks' (Spencer 2006, p. 364).

The result of the all island referendum on the Good Friday Agreement was a 71% yes vote in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland it was 94%. With the signing of the Good Friday Agreement by most of the major political actors and the endorsement by the electorate both north and south of the border Northern Ireland gradually began to move from being a conflict to a post-conflict society. A peace building phase began in Northern Ireland and although there have been setbacks and sporadic acts of violence by dissidents the peace has held and the devolved power sharing institutions are developing and consolidating.

## **Conclusions**

Previous research on the use of PR and publicity techniques by terrorist groups has traced specific kinds of trajectories in regard to the kinds of PR employed. So, for example, Picard (1989) suggests that a common pattern is:

A group that begins using large-scale propaganda of the deed actions may reduce such violence if the group's cause or the group itself receives some recognition by

the public, authorities, and other parties...Among terrorist groups, the larger and more organized groups employ more and highly sophisticated publicity techniques intent on portraying their continuing – although usually smaller scale – violent acts as rational and justified’ (Picard 1989, p. 15).

Our findings would suggest that this is only partially true in the case of the republican movement which, while it did develop a highly skilled PR capacity, also continued to employ large scale propaganda of the deed type actions almost up until the actual negotiations surrounding the Good Friday Agreement in late 1997. Indeed the year before the agreement they were still employing symbolic and economically costly ‘spectaculars’, in the form of massive bombs in London and Manchester to deliver ‘messages’ to the British Government and people. Picard also argues that some terrorist groups, understanding the on-going nature of political struggle, strategically plan their campaign to begin with significant levels of violence, “then reduce its scale and replace the propaganda of the deed with other forms of publicity and lower levels of violence, and may indicate that they will give up perpetrating terrorist acts in exchange for official recognition” (Picard 1989, p.21). The participants in our study would reject the notion that the republican movements’ development from the violent armed struggle of the early 1970s through to the peace process of the 1990s was a carefully planned political and PR project. Instead unforeseen opportunities and developments were taken advantage of and policies and strategies developed over the long period of conflict which would have been unthinkable to the 1970s abstentionist republican movement determined to remove the British state from Northern Ireland at the point of a gun.

It is interesting to note that the key PR figures in the republican movement during the Troubles were also at the heart of republican strategic decision making, they were part of what Grunig *et al* (2002, p.141) refer to as the “dominant coalition”. Arguably this allowed the leadership of the republican movement to navigate away from political violence and toward peacemaking while at the same time keeping its membership intact, its sympathizers on-board and its electoral base growing. It is clear that key PR skills in respect to both media management and internal communication were crucial in communicating this policy and strategy development. Richard McAuley notes:

We were always very conscious of PR and its importance... We were always looking for different angles and different ways to get the message of the party

across. As we tried to develop the party and build Sinn Féin then the party leadership at different levels became of conscious of having the need to have PR people within the structure.

Aside from sharing this notion of the centrality of PR to an organisation's success it should be noted that there is little conceptual agreement with other features of the Grunigian paradigm. There is, for example, no articulation of a two-way symmetrical approach to communication except when that communication concerns its internal stakeholders. Jim Gibney describes a conception of PR where evaluation is central but it is very much a one-way communication model that he envisages:

[B]uilt into any PR system has to be review, assessment and so on...its just the ABC, if you're into publicity, whether its armed propaganda or ordinary publicity then yes you have to build a review mechanism into it, an assessment mechanism into it to be able to say, well did we get our message out there yesterday or not? Was our message understood or misunderstood?

Ultimately it is PR as advocacy or propaganda that is articulated as the main understanding and definition of the activity by the participants in this study. Richard McAuley puts this view most forcefully: "I don't believe you can distinguish between PR and propaganda...its basically all the same thing, its about selling a message and the message can be a good message or a bad message and its how you present it, its how you package it, its how you sell it."

Finally, it is clear that more generally the history of the republican movement in Northern Ireland doesn't adhere particularly closely to the patterns identified in previous theoretical accounts of terrorist campaigns. For instance Ross and Gurr (1989) argue:

With a handful of revolutionary exceptions, political terrorists rarely achieve their announced objectives. It is often the case, though, that some progress toward some of their objectives is realized...Of course such efforts at accommodation virtually never acknowledge the demands of groups using terrorism, but rather are addressed to grievances that are expressed by more moderate spokesmen using less extreme means' (p. 413).

This notion of the typical trajectory of political terrorist groups doesn't fit particularly well with the story of the republican movement and in some ways the opposite of what Ross and Gurr state has occurred. While they have not achieved their overall political objective of a United Ireland outside of British jurisdiction they have

made substantial progress as a political movement. Sinn Féin is now the largest party, in respect to electoral success, in the nationalist or republican tradition having supplanted the traditionally more moderate spokesmen for that tradition. In fact, it achieved the highest share of the vote of all political parties in Northern Ireland in the 2010 general election (26%). They also sit as joint leaders of the power sharing government of the new devolved legislature in Northern Ireland. In addition the Good Friday Agreement guarantees a constitutional arrangement which contains an all-Ireland element of governance, the North-South Ministerial Council which decides on a range of cross-border issues. Arguably a key reason for these achievements, and for the continuing success of Sinn Féin, is that the leadership of the organisation took very seriously the need to develop a well organised, well resourced, PR capacity both in respect to media relations and internal organisational communication.

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<sup>i</sup> Interviews carried out by Andy Purcell, Carla Heatley and Liam O'Connor.

<sup>ii</sup> Internment was introduced in August 1971 and ended in December 1975.